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Virginia Role in History

The Sun is to be saluted for its excellent Bicentennial series, "They Came From Virginia," by Jeanne Johnson Rust. It gives everyone a better understanding of the role played by Virginians in the winning of our nation's independence.

In a recent column, "500 pounds of gunpowder," I believe the honor to Virginia would not be complete without an important footnote paying tribute to the Virginia officers and an important secret ally -- Spain -- who made it all possible.

On May 12, 1776, the Virginia Committee of Safety dispatched two officers, Captain George Gibson and Lieutenant Linn, to New Orleans to seek new supplies of gunpowder essential to the colony's defense. The two Virginians, assuming the guise of traders, journeyed down the Ohio and Mississippi from Fort Pitt to New Orleans.

With the invaluable assistance of Oliver Pollock, a New Orleans businessman, they were successful in persuading the Spanish Governor, Luis de Unzaga y Amezaga, to make the secret sale of gunpowder to Virginia. Linn took three-fourths of the gunpowder up the river, getting it to Forts Pitt and Wheeling just in time to save those outposts from the British and their Indian allies.

To mask the effort and to convince the British that Spain was not violating its neutrality, Captain Gibson permitted himself to be arrested. He was then released quietly and sailed for Philadelphia with the remaining gunpowder and other needed supplies--muskets, blankets and medicine. The gunpowder with which Clark first outfitted his men was part of the twelve thousand pounds of gunpowder (!) obtained by Gibson and Linn from the Spanish King's Stores in New Orleans.

Later, as Clark continued his military successes in the west, he continued to depend on the secret aid of Spain granted by Unzaga's successor as Governor of New Orleans, Bernardo de Galvez. de Galvez-- for whom Galveston, Texas, is named and who was this year honored by a statue in Washington--provided not only the needed military supplies, but the finances and credit needed to fund the Commissary Department and pay the troops.

de Galvez provided large sums from his "very secret service money" and loaned even more from the Spanish Treasury, and has been credited with enabling the Americans to retain control of the territory north of the Ohio.

He even allowed the Americans to fly the Spanish flag on supply ships to protect them from shelling by English shore batteries. And, when Spain entered the war on the side of the Americans on June 21, 1779, it was Galvez, with Oliver Pollock riding at his side, who captured Baton Rouge, Natchez, Mobile and Pensacola from the British.

Thus, in a footnote to the "500 pounds of gunpowder," Virginians may find new pride in the success of Captain Gibson and Lieutenant Linn, and those Virginians of Hispanic descent may add to that the pride of knowing the vital role of Unzaga and Galvez in coming to Virginia's aid.

(CAUGHEY, John Walton, Bernardo de Galvez in Louisiana.. Berkeley, Univ. of California, 1934. p. 98.)

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